

Book Review

Urban Reflections: Photography and Poetry in Dialogue, by Wilfried Raussert and Ketaki Datta, KIPU, 2018. (Book Review)

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Urban Reflections: Photography and Poetry in Dialogue is a book dedicated to street artists and urban dwellers. While we walk in the city many a times, we are present and at the same time absent –closing our eyes to people, to things near. Myriad of thoughts cross our mind while we are caught up in matters of everyday life and we walk the streets lost in glamorous sights. As the foreword to the book states, “this book wants to unravel the beauty and politics of contemporary city space in the Americas. It wishes to create a dialogue between photography, poetry, and street art.” Street art is unofficial in nature; it is independent visual art created usually in public locations for public visibility. Sometimes, it takes the form of guerrilla art, which has an intention to make a bold personal statement about the society in general in which the artist lives in.

Wilfried Raussert is chair of North American and Inter American Studies at Bielefeld University, Germany. He is director of International Association of Inter American Studies, author and editor of 20 scholarly books. Ketaki Datta is Associate Professor of English in a government college in Kolkata, India. So far, she has published two novels, two translated novels and a book of poetry. Thus, their practices may have been divergent, but it is the sense of evanescence and mellowness which the changing American city induces that brings them together –an introspective writer like Ketaki Datta so captivated by mortality and Wilfried Raussert whose photography is marked by dynamism and vigor even as he tries to capture fleeting moments of poignance before they are shattered by harsh realities of urban life.

The book begins with the photograph of a street art by Jim Morrison (photograph paired with its text on the facing page), the American singer, songwriter and poet, who served as the lead vocalist of the rock band, *The Doors*. Due

to his poetic lyrics, his widely recognized voice, his unpredictable and erratic performances and mystery regarding his untimely death, Morrison is regarded by critics and fans as one of the most iconic and influential pioneers in the history of rock. Datta writes: “Jim Morrison, after singing such/ Fiery numbers,/ How could you succumb to/ Nullity, under alien stars?” (“Light Our Fire” 1-2). A photograph of a man wearing a *luchador* mask, a fine street-art in a canteen prompts Datta to write, “A bizarre logo ‘luchador’/ Above/ Marks the canteen as unique,/ The closed eyes of a man/ With close-knit thick brows” (“Cantina Luchador” 3-4). Thus, this unique dialog of poetry with photography of street art becomes an exercise in producing the cultural history of the American people.

The photograph called “Sun dried butterflies,” bypasses the lure of mythology and steers clear of gender straitjacketing. “Look, her attire has thousand flowers/ On it, that could easily be exchanged/ With the sundry butterflies/ Painted on the wall!” (“Sun-Dried Butterflies” 4-5). Various photographs of Raussert that speak of distinct street art introduce the theme, delving into enigmatic poetry of Datta that, inadvertently yet spontaneously, merge into strange, unbidden shapes. A photograph of Buddha sitting in the meditating posture in the background with a posh car and the owner in the foreground, busy wiping the last speck of dust from the car’s chassis, maps Raussert’s own journey from an artist through conversations with himself. This is matched with Datta’s tentative tapestry of ideas and cursory sketches: “With a duster in his hand,/ He keeps dusting away/ The last speck of dirt,/ That might sit firm on it,/ but, can no way-/ Work is worship to him,/ Different God is Buddha!” (“Some Other God” 10-11).

“Cleansing the Countenance,” the photograph showing an artfully weathered street and the

countenance of a glamorous damsel, with a car in the foreground carrying an advertisement which promises of maintenance and carpet cleaning, takes on the immediacy of an unfolding drama. The poet writes, "Cobwebby maze beneath thy face?/ Who again would take the risk of/ Cleaning the shadowy trail/ On thy right cheek?/ And who cleaned thy left cheek –come, tell!" (14-15). In "A Tale of Walking In and Leaving" a beguiling imminence imbues Raussert's landscape, while Datta's poem pulsates with the heave and jostle of threadbare fragments. "Anno Domini begins and/ The child stands as a dividing line? Between the Time-nascent,/ And the Time-going, going, gone!" (17-18). The next poem, "A Tale of Walking In and Leaving," unveils a fragile mind space where blurred, fluid childhood memories seem to float and coalesce into dark intimations. Here, time stands still.

The photo "Caught In Between" has a simple anchor of binaries: stillness and movement. As the accompanying poem reads: "A man caught unawares/ between two images/ Of the same lady on the wall/ Throwing avid gazes. But his pose was normal, sans any air(s)/ Though he had no choice in the pair,/ As they were mirror-reflected images/ Though he would not by mistake be in cages!" writes Datta (25-26). In a unique combination of states, the rootedness of Raussert is matched here by the reaching out of Datta. "Tricky Thing" shows two street artists spray painting the walls weaving a face out of an off-beat, infectious rhythm. The poet writes, "Representation is a tricky thing/ It depends on you and your positioning/ Representation believe me means complication/ It depends on you and your competition in the ring/ To make the representation of representation an / authentic thing" (27-28). The next pair, "Green Hue" (29-30) is a kind of private soliloquy while "Secret Sharers" (29-30) traces an insidious montage with silhouetted figures.

As the book continues, "Man and Music" warns against a proprietary, willful degradation of the murals created affectionately in the walls of cities in the Americas: "While the roads keep winding and winding/ They might jam against oblivion/ The mural washed away/ Even before tomorrow," (33-34). "Urban Mobilities" speak of Raussert's wry obeisance to Time's ravages,

Datta writes: "The fresh morning air pushes him onward/ He looks ahead/ Hoping to leave the crossroads behind" (37-38). "In Awe" speaks of the remarkable walls that the street artists created, walls that are as much about forbidding barriers as about passages of surreptitious communication. The next photograph, "Come and Dance With me" (41-42), delights the readers in a cosmic dance that soars from notional micro to macro scales. Raussert's photograph of the woman in "Walk to Walk" shows an onlooker curiously self-absorbed in a meditative anxiety, while Datta weaves fine lines with ease. "Moves off he, leaving the wall behind,/ His misconception, his surging desire/ All seemed so blind!/ Smiled he again to himself and walked on/ How was he befooled, by such impish an emotion?!" (53-54).

Overall, *Urban Reflections: Photography and Poetry In Dialogue* can be read, enjoyed and shared, in the public spaces of our cities: cafes, parks, street corners, the metro, the bus. This unique book is a poetic paperback gallery of urban life. It pleases the eyes of the viewers, it inspires the mind of the readers, it infectiously touches the reader's soul and helps people to open their eyes to the city spaces around them beyond consumerism. In sum, it is an asset to the individual and to the library.

Author's biography

Sutanuka Ghosh Roy is an academic (assistant professor at a college in West Bengal), reviewer, and poet whose work has appeared in various international and national venues.